

It is unfortunate that we are seeing an attempt in Congress to scapegoat America's unions for the economic problems that beset us.

After all, it was not America's grocery clerks, nurses, teachers, postal workers and electricians that nearly caused the meltdown of the economy. It wasn't America's labor unions that were pushing for tax loopholes that made our revenue system a hopeless, inefficient mess. It wasn't unions that pushed for shortcuts for worker safety that produced the tragedies that we have seen in our mines. America's working men and women didn't engineer poor loans, cheat consumers, and transform financial institutions into giant casinos.

No doubt there are some consumers who took unfair advantage of the system, as well as others who were not as vigilant as they should have been before the meltdown, but the truth is that they were part of an unprecedented economic scheme that played on those weaknesses, gullibility and often greed, turning it into a vast industry.

Are there some areas where unions have been too effective in securing benefits for their members? It probably depends on who you ask about the give and take of the collective bargaining process. The leadership structures of unions are in fact much more democratic than their corporate counterparts. Officials are routinely challenged for reelection, and there are insurgents in even the most powerful and entrenched unions - something one seldom sees in a corporate boardroom. How many of those directors are defeated? It's not easy to even have opposing nominees through today's shareholder democracy. It's much less democratic than what happens with unions.

There is a very direct remedy in the negotiation process. I've been on both sides of this issue and I've had ups and downs with some of my friends in organized labor. For 18 years I was a local elected official, part of that time responsible for the collective bargaining program. I like to think that I bargained tough and fair. But the point is that I bargained. I've supported collective bargaining rights for public employees from my first session in the Oregon legislature and still believe that honest, tough, principled negotiation will lead to the best results. Having somebody dictate working conditions is not calculated to enhance productivity. It matters how people are treated and how they feel. Employee-owned corporations, particularly those that also have unions, illustrate this principle in spades.

One of the best-performing economies in the world is Germany, where they still manufacture and have a huge export market for high-value products. Germans work hard to integrate labor and business with government in the decision-making process, something that is all too rare in the United States.

Unions are not the answer for every employee and every company, but every employee and every company deserves to make that choice. That fact is that even non-union companies benefit from the strength of collective bargaining in our economy. I have had executives at successful manufacturing companies candidly tell me that they treat their employees right because they don't want them to unionize. Even these non-union companies' employees benefit from higher wages, better benefits and a system that respects the worker because it is a strong part of our culture.

Yet instead of treating employees fairly by allowing them to organize, far too many corporations have chosen instead to attack the fundamentals of collective bargaining. It is an art form to stall, delay, intimidate, and even to flagrantly violate the laws of collective bargaining in this country, weak and ineffectively enforced as they are. Collective bargaining has been under systematic attack from my Republican colleagues in Congress, and Republican administrations have sought to transform the National Labor Relations Board into a toothless, passive entity that is unable or unwilling to protect the rights of employees to organize. This is not calculated to produce a spirit of cooperation, and it is not clear that people need to cheat the system in order to avoid any excesses of collective bargaining.

I would argue the opposite is true. It is not just workers who benefit from unionization - it is society as a whole. It was organized labor that spearheaded efforts for a 40 hour work week, and it is not just rhetoric when people say that unions were the ones who brought you the weekend. Unions have played a key role in extending health security to millions of Americans, workplace safety to millions of employees, and consumer and environmental protections to our families.

I don't pretend that unions are perfect, and I've had some differences with them over the years. But make no mistake: unions are amongst the few who stand up for justice in the workplace, protecting the unorganized, and fighting for a livable minimum wage. It's important to reflect upon our collective bargaining system. I'm all for fine-tuning, but I am adamantly opposed to gutting the rights and protections of workers. We all should start by acknowledging the debt we owe to unions, and work to stop this wholesale assault on the American worker.